

"Complete transcendence"

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Boi Tran at her gallery in

Hue. Photo by Tuyet Khoa

"Me con" (Mother and children) fetched nearly US\$10,000 at a Christie's auction in Hong Kong on May 26, 2013.

The lacquer triptych was the fourth painting by Boi Tran that had been sold internationally through auctions held by Sotheby's and Christie's since 2008.

Boi Tran is only the second Vietnamese female painter, the other being Le Thi Luu (1911-1988), selected by the two prestigious auction houses, said Jean-François Hubert, who has been working as a senior consultant at Christie's for 10 years, as also a former senior consultant with Sotheby's.

However, unlike Luu, who was one of the rare, notable female alumni of Victor Tardieu's École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine in Hanoi in the 1930s, Boi Tran is a self-taught artist, who only began to learn the fundamentals of painting over a decade ago from Nguyen Trung (born 1942), one of the country's great contemporary lacquer artists.

Boi Tran did not find it easy to paint. "I concentrated on my initial works to such an extent that I did not recognize I was standing in front of the easel day and night.

"I burned all the works I felt unsatisfied with or those my teacher did not approve. I forgot the old ones and started working even harder on the new."

Tran's creations are made with different materials, including oil, silk and lacquer.

Most of her paintings capture the beauty of women and flowers, mainly lotuses and Queen of the night (*epiphyllum oxypetalum*) a type of cactaceous plant whose flowers blossom during the night and wither soon after.

The young women in Tran's paintings appear in traditional Vietnamese *ao dai*, a dress she herself wears all the time, and their eyes are gazing into the distance, looking down at a flower or closed in prayer.

"Boi Tran's pictorial work presents profound originality: it is part of an isolated approach removed from the dominant schools; it expresses the search for universal humanism deeply rooted in a characteristically Vietnamese sensitivity," Hubert wrote in a Sotheby's catalogue in 2008 as a Boi Tran's painting was put up for auction in Hong Kong.

"A student of the famous painter Nguyen Trung, whose muse she became and for whom she remained a model, she transcended herself. A superficial study would reveal great similarity of expression between the two artists, whereas, much more subtly, in Boi Tran's creations the model the object, in other words transcends itself in as much as the object represented becomes its own subject: it leaves the painting, escapes from the painter and represents itself: the "'self' becomes "'me' and the transcendence is complete."

Boi Tran, who was born in Quang Tri Province in 1957 and moved to neighboring Hue later, said her paintings were officially displayed for the first time in 1995 at an exhibition of works by women painters in Hue. In the following years she regularly joined the annual exhibition with her colleagues in the central city.

Her first solo exhibition was organized in 2004 at Hanoi's Minh Chau Gallery, which then was run and named after her eldest daughter.

In recent years, she has mainly exhibited at her own gallery, located in Boi Tran Garden on Thien An Hill, some 10 kilometers southwest of Hue.

Unique gallery, collection

In 1998, Boi Tran opened a gallery on the ground floor of the Saigon Morin Hotel, overlooking the Huong (Perfume) River and Trang Tien Bridge in Hue, becoming one of the town's first private gallery owners.

Boi Tran Gallery's opening gathered many famous artists from many parts of the country, especially Hue-born poet Nguyen Khoa Diem, then the Minister of Culture and Information, who joined the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

The gallery soon became a rendezvous for local artists as well as collectors at home and abroad.

Five years later, Boi Tran moved her gallery to a garden on Thien An Hill, an area with many low mountains covered with pine trees.

"Many of my friends said I was crazy when they learnt I planned to build a gallery in the area, which was a deserted area then. However, I knew it was an ideal location for me to nourish and realize my dream," she said.

She and a staff of some 50 people worked very hard to relocate the *nha ruong* timber houses with carved wooden beams and pillars popular in Hue and many central provinces, which she had bought from different localities.

They also planted trees and flowering plants, built winding roads to different parts of the garden and dug a large pond with a small house from which one can see lotuses and schools of fish swimming in the clear waters.

Today, the Boi Tran Garden never fails to impress visitors with its picturesque landscape and a complex of five *nha ruong*, two of which are used to display not only the owner's paintings but also art works and valuable fine arts documents she has collected over the past 20 years.

Boi Tran's collection, which currently passes 200 paintings, includes works of famous Vietnamese painters from different periods like Nguyen Tu Nghiem, To Ngoc Van, Tran Quang Tran, Tran Dong Luong, Nguyen Do Cung, her teacher Nguyen Trung, Dinh Cuong, Hoang Dang Nhuan and Thanh Chuong.

The most valuable works in her collection, according to Tran, are a total of 130 creations by the late Tran Quang Tran (1900-1969), also known as "Ngym", one of the most famous Vietnamese painters in the 1930s together with Le Pho, Tran Van Can, Pham Hau and Nguyen Khang.

Most of the works by Tran Quang Tran are sketches of many famous persons in Vietnam, not only artists but also those prominent in different arenas like former Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, then in his twenties, and poet Tu Mo, born Ho Trong Hieu (1900-1976), who was known for his satirical poems lampooning the French and feudal regimes of the 1930s.

Boi Tran said that the son of Tran Quang Tran left his father's treasure to her as he trusted her, hoping she will help unveil the late artist's creations to the public.

"It's my destiny to have the works of Tran Quang Tran," she said.

Passionate about fine arts, Boi Tran has also spent time collecting collect valuable documents and books on painting in Vietnamese and English, and books by Christie's and Sotheby's introducing works put up in their auctions.

Mother's grief



A painting expressing Boi Tran's pain as she tried to reconcile to the loss of her son, who died aged 22 while trying to save a drowning friend. He was studying in university in the US.

Many paintings by Boi Tran, a mother of two, in recent years feature images of a mother and two children a girl and a boy.

One painting catches special attention. A middle-aged woman in a blue *ao dai* has in her arms a young man at peace, eyes closed. A red blanket covers his body. Sitting beside them is a young woman with a sad face, her hands holding the young man's head.

It is one of the works Boi Tran created after her son passed away at the age of 22 in San Diego, the United States, while trying to save a drowning friend.

The sudden death of her beloved son left the artist shocked and broken-hearted for a long time.

It took many years for her to try her best to continue her life, as "my son in heaven will only feel peace in his mind when he knows that his mother has a better life on earth."

Painting became her way to deal with the pain and express her love for her children.

Boi Tran said she would leave for the US in the next few days to visit her daughter's family. Her face seemed to brighten up as she spoke of two cute grandchildren who she said infuse a fresh spirit in her heart, helping her feel that "life is still beautiful."

Boi Tran cherishes many plans, including publishing a book on fine arts, a book introducing some 100 Hue dishes she learned from her family, and a book telling the stories of her life, especially her staff, who are mostly members of poor families who helped her develop the Boi Tran Garden, as well as other gardens in town.

"Now I have a staff of 50 people, who are skilled at carpentry, wood carving, and renovating nha ruong. We design and build gardens for several friends who have liked the Boi Tran Garden."

Though she did not say it, it was evident that the garden is very much part of the artist, part of her flesh and bone and spirit.

As Jean-François Hubert once said, "The garden would not exist without Boi Tran. Yet Boi Tran the painter would not exist without the garden."



"Me con' (Mother and Children), a lacquer triptych by Boi Tran, was sold for nearly US\$10,000 at a Christie's auction in Hong Kong on May 26, 2013

- **"Madonna"**, oil on canvas, for around US\$5,500 at Sotheby's Hong Kong on October 6, 2008 (Lot 853)

- **"Family on the beach"**, oil on canvas, around US\$5,000 at Sotheby's Hong Kong on October 6, 2009 (Lot 333)

- **"Elegance in Hue"**, lacquer, around US\$7,000 at Christie's Hong Kong on May 30, 2010 (Lot 1205)

- **"Mother and children"**, lacquer, around US\$10,000 at Christie 's Hong Kong on May 26, 2013 (Lot 3633)

The main bidders and buyers were from Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

(Data provided by Jean-François Hubert)

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